

The Cultural Work of Sejong the Great

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Sejong's Last Years

Throughout his reign, Sejong had worked to perfect Confucian institutions in government and administration, and to strengthen Confucian values in Korean education and life. Although in this he followed the long established policies of T'aejo and T'aejong, he also was in accord with his own deeply felt convictions, nurtured by a lifetime of study and research in the Confucian classics and in Korean and Chinese literature, music and history. But he was not because of this hostile to Buddhism, in the manner of most Korean scholars and government officials throughout the long history of the Chosŏn dynasty. Indeed, in the last years of his life, Sejong turned more and more to the comforts of Buddhism, and this increased the distance that had been growing between him and many of his senior officials. Sejong had actually shown Buddhist sympathies early in his reign, and the agencies of remonstrance had fought him on this ever since 1426, when they petitioned him to have removed from his throne hall a Buddhist prayer engraved in the exotic Siddharn script on one of the ceiling beams. On that occasion Sejong had gone along with their wishes, and he also followed earlier dynastic precedents in applying strict standards for the licensing of monks, severely restricting the number of Buddhist temples that could be maintained throughout the country, and

limiting the amount of land that they could hold. But insofar as he personally was concerned, he was not only open-minded but positively cordial to Buddhism. In 1428, he admitted monks to the palace on his birthday. "The monks' robes mixed with the officials' caps and insignia, and the Indian music clashed with the sounds of the gongs and reed organs." This aroused a protest which he dismissed without discussion. Such complaints continued throughout his reign, some of them coming, not surprisingly, from the ever combative Ch'oe Malli. Things came to a head in 1448 and 1449, when Sejong had a shrine built on the palace grounds. The bombast that followed was particularly bitter; the students of the Confucian university even went on strike, and conducted a demonstration outside the palace.

During this same period, Sejong composed – in Korean, using his alphabet – hundreds of devotional Buddhist poems, all dedicated to the memory of his wife, Queen Sŏhŏn, who had passed away in 1446. Sejong himself passed these last years on a reduced schedule, attending to important business but spending much time in study and thought, finding what peace he could.

In the early months of 1450, his accumulating pains became too serious for his physicians to alleviate. He died on March 30, 1450, in the thirty-second year of his reign, at the age of fifty-three. The name Sejong, by which he is known to history and which means something like "epochal ancestor," was chosen for him at that time.

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